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The Menehunes

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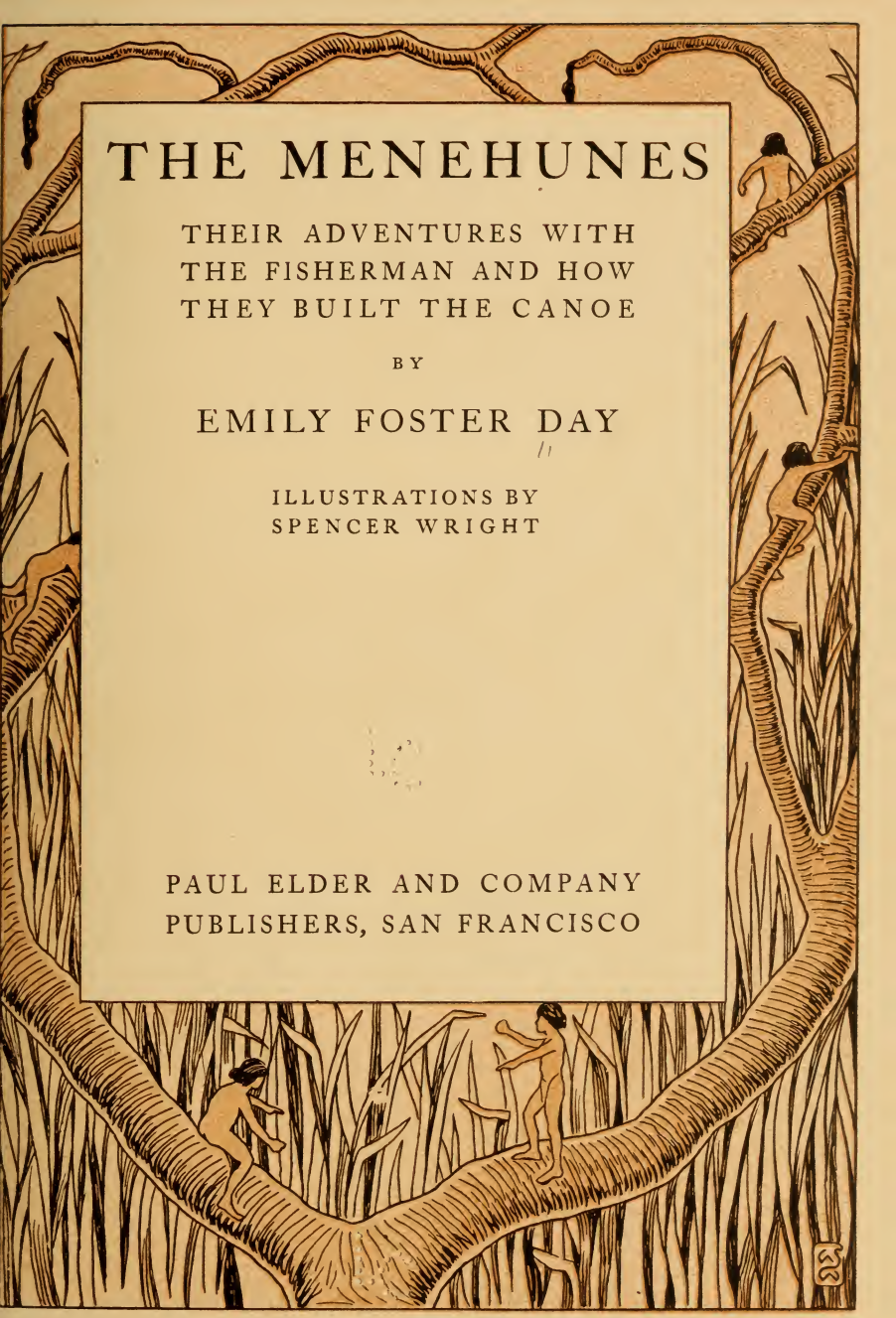
THE MÉ-NÉ-HU-NÉS

BEQUEST OF
DR. WALTER R. STEINER
JAN. 20, 1943



THE MENEHUNES

THEIR ADVENTURES WITH THE FISHERMAN AND HOW THEY BUILT THE CANOE

BY

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Let me introduce to you The Mé-né-hunés. Every one in Hawaii knows them, and now that they are "annexed" to the United States, with the rest of the beautiful little country, and are good, loyal Americans, you should know them too.

To the best of my knowledge none of my friends — even my Hawaiian friends — have actually seen the mysterious little people of the rocks, but the ancient folk-lore of the islands is full of tales of their wonderful works; and if any one wants more proof — why, there is the great water-course of Kauai, cut through the solid rock, — no man knows by whom else, — and the Hill of the Shrimps where the Menehunes received their reward from good King Ola and his wise high priest. But that would make another tale. — E. F. D.

Some one had committed a monstrous crime! Deep in the heart of the forest of Hilo one of the gigantic old *koa* trees, whose leaves were shaped like the new moon, lay prone on the ground, its mighty branches crushed, its sturdy roots hacked and torn from the soil.

For hours it had lain in the blistering heat of the tropical sun, its life-sap dripping from the ragged wounds, its beautiful leaves hanging limp on shriveled stems. At last the lengthening shadows grew thick and dusky, the amber glow faded from the sky, and cool, gentle night wrapped the fallen giant in sheltering darkness.

Then through the still forest there stole a sound like the rustle of dry

leaves stirred by the wind. The murmur grew, it spread through the woods, and up into the highest reaches of the mountains; the ferns and long grasses swayed in the breathless air, and from the rocks and mossy coverts poured a hurrying throng of Menehunes, the tiny dwarf folk of Hawaii, who planted every tree and fern and shrub in the great, wide woods. Gesticulating wildly the little brown people swarmed about the prostrate tree like fallen leaves caught in a whirlwind. They scrambled into the branches and scolded, they perched on the upturned roots and denounced the vandal who had committed the dreadful deed. From root to crown they covered the massive trunk, and still the forest rustled with their coming.

"It is the work of a canoe builder," said the one with the cloak and helmet of fine yellow feathers. "I know, for they cut the roots below the ground so as to lose none of the length of the tree." But his voice was scarcely heard above the wrathful clamor.

Then suddenly the noise ceased and the Menehunes scattered through the forest in all directions. Some sped down over the lower hillsides gathering the long grass, and as they ran they wove it into strong, tough cords; others swiftly hewed and trimmed away the broken branches, and bound the oozing cuts with loam; still others dug the soil from about the maimed roots till they rested above a deep hole in the ground; and at midnight they were ready for

the real work. To every twig on every branch on the upper side of the fallen tree they tied a tiny rope, and passed them all over the stoutest limbs of the tallest trees, and scores and scores of the little people laid hold of each line. They braced their feet against the rocks, and tugged and pulled till their round eyes bulged and their cheeks puffed out like balloons. Under the great trunk hundreds of little backs bent to the utmost strain. Slowly, very slowly, the old *koa* tree rose from the ground, an inch, then an ell. The moon came out from behind a cloud to watch, and the stars forgot to wink in the tense excitement. Up, up, every man pulling his hardest; at last the great roots dropped into the hole, and

the lines suddenly loosening, the Menehunes turned somersaults till they landed in a heap in the bed of a tiny stream.

While the morning star still shone in the heavens, the little people stood triumphantly about the tree that again towered skywards, and mopped their hot faces with the cool leaves of the ferns. But as the gray-blue sky began to redden at the approach of the sun, they drifted away out of sight, and the whole forest drowsed in the sleepy dawn.

Hardly, though, had the last Menehune disappeared when Laka, the canoe builder, strode through the forest jungle and paused in the *koa* grove, looking about him in dubious wonder. Every tree stood in stately dignity; and so far as mortal eyes could see, not a stone

had been turned for ages, not a handful of earth disturbed since the first fallen leaves changed to mold, for the Menehunes work well, and they work without hurry.

Down the brown back of the man crept a chill of fear; then he shrugged his shoulders defiantly, and again choosing a tree that suited his purpose, one after another he slashed off the long roots where they dug deep into the soil, and before the sun set another hale old giant of the woods lay quivering on its torn branches.

It was a hard day's work, and the tired man shouldered his ax and trudged down the mountain to his cabin by the sea. But when in the morning he returned to the forest to trim the log to

the length of a canoe, not even a chip of all those that had fallen from his ax the day before remained to mark the spot. The trees all stood in their primeval grandeur, grave, august, stupendously wise; for again the little people of the forest had perfectly done their work.

Laka was angry. With a swinging blow of his ax that awoke the rolling echoes, he attacked another big tree with the moon-shaped leaves, and so savage were the blows he rained upon it that, long before the day was done, it, too, crashed to the earth. Then he took his calabash out of the net in which he had hung it from a branch, and sat down to his meager supper of *poi* and dried fish. By and by, after he

had finished and there was nothing more to do but wait, he crept into the shelter of the thick leaves and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was still early. The southern cross was barely above the horizon, though the last ray of the short twilight had long ago hidden away in the rift between the sea and the sky. Across the heavens like a tattered veil streamed the Milky Way, and the stars, set deep in the blue vault, seemed to crackle and snap, so still and dark and silent lay the island world beneath them.

Even in the highest reaches of the mountain forest the leaves of the trees and the giant ferns hung motionless under the spell of the witching night, and here and there in the clear patches

among the trees the starlight glistened along the loop of a wet vine or lit up a hanging dewdrop like a tiny lamp.

Laka lay still in his leafy shelter and watched while the moon rose and flooded the space about the fallen tree with a clear, silvery light. Stealthily the first rustle of a hurrying host again sounded through the woods; the soft patter grew till it filled the air like the hum of a teakettle over a fire, and before his eyes the Menehunes bounded through the thickets and crowded into the open about his hiding-place, chattering angrily at this new outrage.

Laka waited till they were well within his reach, then he snatched three of the little men and popped them, one after the other, into the

calabash and drew the net over them. Like shadows the band melted away, but from every shelter he saw the round, bright eyes watching him anxiously. He crawled out from under the branches and set the calabash down before him.

"Now," he said, "let us talk a little about this affair of the trees."

"We can't talk in this hole," said one of the little men, indignantly. "You didn't wash your calabash after supper!"

"Oh, you'd like to get out and run away, wouldn't you!" exclaimed Laka, with a triumphant grin.

"We couldn't run if we were out," said another of the three. "We are so covered with your sticky *poi* that we'd

gather stones and leaves like a ball of snow rolled from the top of Mauna Kea. Besides, we give you our word, and that a Menehune never breaks."

When Laka removed the net the three little men clamored stiffly from the bowl, and each sat carefully down on a clean fern frond. A ripple of derisive laughter floated out from the shadows.

"Do you know," said Laka, sternly, "you little people have wasted two whole days for me?"

"But the forest is ours, and you are wasting our trees!" they exclaimed, angrily.

"Ay, I know, but a canoe I must have," stubbornly answered Laka; "one large enough and strong enough to cross the stormy channel. We on the

coast are fishermen, and our canoes are small. Last week a storm arose while my father was on the sea. He never returned, and our wise men say that his boat was blown across to the Maui shore. My mother weeps on the sand by the edge of the waves and will not eat. I must bring my father back or she will die. Three times with great labor I have felled a tree, and I have yet to hew the canoe."

While Laka spoke, the Menehunes, reassured, crept out from their hiding-places and stood about him in a half-circle, listening with sympathy in their big, somber eyes.

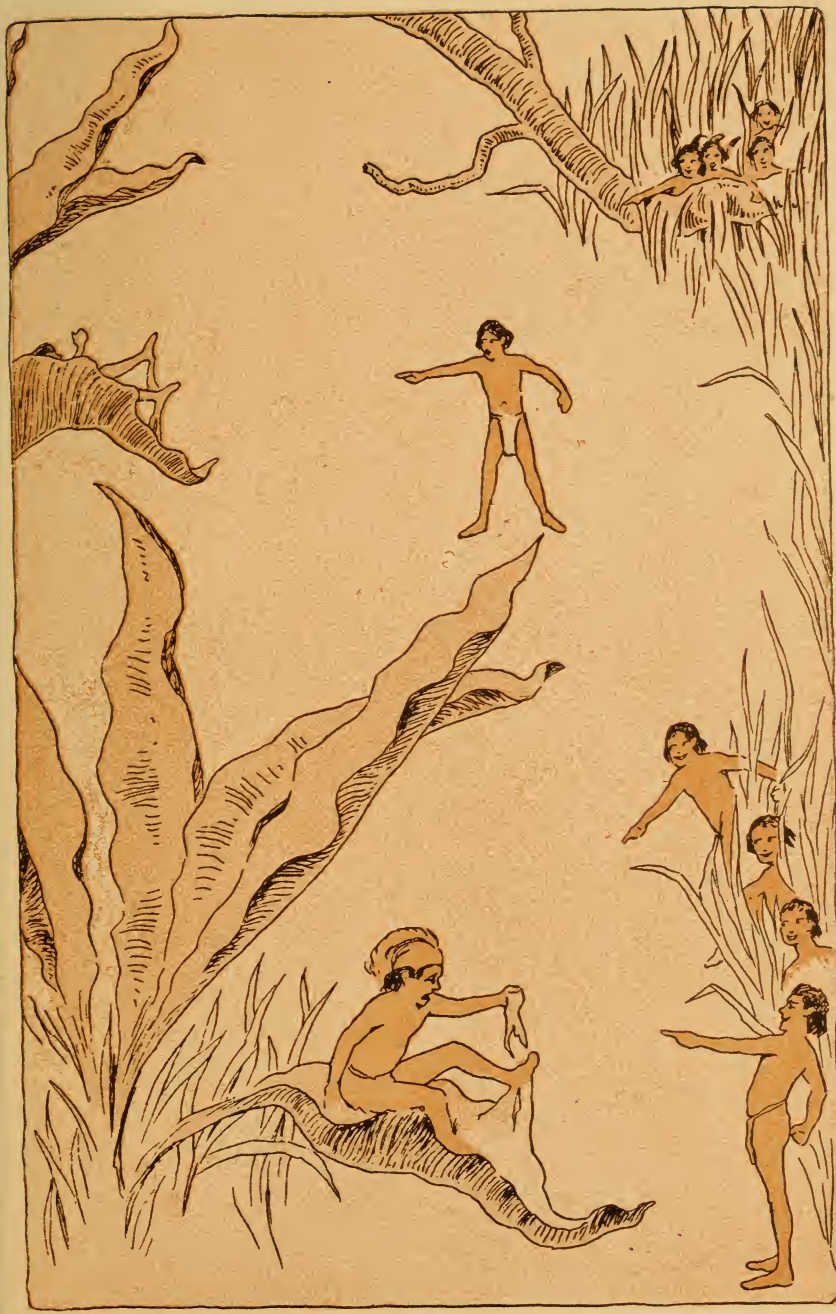
"It is a good cause," said one of the captured three, glancing stiffly around at his companions.

"Even a tree could serve no better purpose," another said with imposing dignity, though much of it was undoubtedly due to the quality and quantity of the *poi* on his back; and the third, who seemed of high importance, though his helmet stuck fast to one ear, said:

"We, the little people of the forest, will make your canoe. Return to the village by the sea and build a shelter of cocoanut leaves on the beach. Spread a supper for us under the shed, for we shall be hungry by the time we have carried your boat down the mountain, and the night will be too far spent for us to find our own food. Also, see to it that no one spies upon us. *Aloha!*" And all of the Menehunes said in chorus, "*Aloha nui!*"

"*Aloha!*" said Laka, picking up his calabash. He looked regretfully at the three who were smeared all over with the dull gray *poi*, but they waved him away, and he left the forest without once looking back, for that would have been most impolite according to the customs of the forest.

When the three little men who had been in the calabash rose from the ground, the fern leaves clung to their backs, for *poi* holds fast what it touches. Then, for full five minutes by the Menehunes' clock in the sky, the captives writhed and twisted; but the fern stems were tough, and not one among all their friends held out a helping hand. Instead, they stood around in a circle and laughed till their little knees



weakened; then they dropped on the ground and rocked themselves in breathless glee until, at last, the three broke their bonds, fell upon the foremost of the mocking crowd, and pummeled them well.

Just how the Menehunes fashioned the canoe, no one knows, but the next morning, when Laka went to the beach, there in the shelter he had built lay the slim, graceful craft, perfect from stem to stern; and every morsel of the feast that Laka had spread for the Menehunes was gone.

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